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ABSTRACT

In January 2003, a national working group was established to review past and current credit developments in England and recommend ways of taking learning credit developments forward in the future. The Learning Skill and Development Agency's case for credit was said to rest on the objectives of recognizing achievement and motivating learners and making the National Qualifications Framework more transparent and flexible. Possible uses of credit by further education, employers, policymakers, national programs, higher education, online learning providers, and the community and voluntary sector were identified. The credit framework developed within further education over the past decade was explained in detail. The following common features of credit systems across the United Kingdom were identified: (1) a multilevel framework with level descriptors from entry level to higher education/professional qualifications; (2) credit based on achievement of units of assessment and learning outcomes; (3) rejection of a "one size fits all" approach; (4) use of notational learning time to establish the credit value of units and qualifications; and (5) recognition that the framework enables but does not by itself establish credit accumulation, credit transfer, and other credit-based systems. The working group called for a common approach to credit operating across the United Kingdom and encompassing post-16 and higher education, including work-based learning. (A glossary and 17-item bibliography are included.) (MN)

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learning and skills development agency

LSDA reports

Credit systems for learning and skills

Current developments

Tony Tait

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Introduction

In January 2003 David Miliband, School Standards Minister, asked the Learning and Skills Council to establish a national working group with a remit to:

- receive the national principles for credit practice in England, together with common specification, terminology and quality assurance, proposed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the LSC
- consult on the proposed principles for credit practice, on the uses and values of credit systems, and on the potential and limits of implementing a national credit system for England during autumn 2003
- report in March 2004 on the outcomes of the consultation and make recommendations on the feasibility of implementing a national credit system in England.

The group has also been asked to:

- assess the extent to which the proposed credit principles could apply equally outside the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)
- ensure that the principles are compatible with the development of the national qualifications framework but also informed by simultaneous evaluation of HE credit developments and the implementation of other emerging systems in the UK.

Further details from www.lsc.gov.uk

Credit has also been given prominence in the White Paper *The future of higher education* (January 2003), which emphasises the role of FE colleges in delivering HE provision.

Credit and qualifications frameworks have become an established feature of policy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The National Qualifications Authority for Ireland is also developing a framework that incorporates credit. In England the feasibility of using credit was raised in the consultative paper on further education *Success for all* (July 2002) and was included in the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit report on workforce development *In demand* (November 2002).

LSDA and its predecessor organisations (FEU and FEDA) have had a longstanding interest and involvement in the development of a credit framework for the post-16 sector. We believe it is now worth taking stock of the current position across the UK. This publication is therefore designed to:

- reflect on credit developments over the past 10 years
- review current developments, especially in England and as they relate to the learning and skills sector
- consider ways in which credit could and does support a range of priorities in terms of government policy
- set out LSDA's views and current approach to credit
- set out key recommendations for taking forward credit developments in the future.

Over the past 10 years a shared set of specifications and approaches has become more widely used and embedded within some parts of the FE and HE systems. These specifications and approaches have been developed through a combination of local, regional and national activity. This has enabled organic development, testing and evolution of the model. Despite the absence of national government initiatives in England to develop a credit framework specification there is a robust and well-tested set of proposals. These must provide the basis for the next stage of development.

Useful information

A glossary below gives a brief explanation of current credit terminology and a frequently asked questions (FAQ) section on page 15 seeks to clarify some common misconceptions and issues about the specification of credit.

Glossary: current credit terms

Assessment criteria

A description of what the learner is expected to do to demonstrate that a learning outcome has been achieved.

Credit

An award made to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level.

Credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS)

A system based on a set of agreed specifications and procedures, which facilitates learners to accumulate and transfer the credit they have gained within and beyond the providing institution.

Credit framework

A set of minimal specifications for measuring, describing, valuing and comparing achievement in a common way.

Credit transcript

A summary of individual learner achievement expressed in terms of credit equivalence or credit value and level.

Credit value

The amount of credit attached to a unit of assessment based on its notional learning time and level.

Currently a 10-hour and 30-hour unit of credit are both used.

Learning outcomes

Statements of what a learner can be expected to know, understand and/or do.

Level

An indicator of the relative demand, complexity, depth of learning and learner autonomy derived from agreed level descriptors.

Notional learning time

The number of hours it is expected a learner (at a particular level) will spend, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes at that level.

It includes all learning relevant to achievement of the learning outcomes, such as directed study, essential practical work, project work, non self-directed private study and assessment.

Unit of assessment

A coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes with associated assessment criteria, having a title, credit value and level.

A unit of assessment may be of any size.

Policy context

Background

In 1992 the Further Education Unit (FEU), published *A basis for credit?* which proposed that the National Qualifications Framework should be fully unitised and credit based. FEU had worked with colleges and other key providers to develop an agreed specification that became known in further education as the credit framework.

The approach was subsequently developed in a series of publications including *A framework for credit* (FEU/FEDA1995). This refined and extended the proposal, and provided a toolkit for credit-based developments in institutions and other organisations.

Over the last decade the credit framework has been widely adopted and implemented, and has led to significant developments including the unitised credit-based approach of Open College Networks across the UK and within most Access to HE provision.

In Wales it gave rise to a national unit and database (Credis) and a range of developments within institutions. In England it has been adopted by institutions and local and regional consortia of FE colleges and other providers. The approach has also begun to inform unitisation in some awarding bodies. In higher education it led to acceptance of the need for a multi-level credit framework encompassing all achievement from entry to postgraduate and professional qualifications.

These developments were accompanied by increasing discussion at policy level about the role of credit and its place in the emerging national qualifications and funding frameworks. The influential HE report on credit *Choosing to change* (Robertson 1994) endorsed the approach and saw its potential for application across further and higher education. The 'Kennedy' report on widening participation, *Learning works* (FEFC 1997), concluded that a national credit accumulation and transfer system (CATS) should be in place within 5 years. The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) for England carried out a number of pilots exploring the part credit might play in the future of further education. The Labour Party included a proposal for credit-based qualifications as part of its post-16 policy proposals in *Aiming higher* (1996). The Dearing review of post-16 education also considered the use of credit in relation to the development of an advanced diploma or baccalaureate.

Credit also featured in the government consultation on lifelong learning *The learning age* (DfEE 1998). An important group of education providers, professional organisations and national bodies including the Association of Colleges (AoC), FFORWM (the organisation representing FE colleges in Wales), the teachers' unions NATFHE and NUT, the Joint Council of Awarding Bodies (JCAB) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) called for credit to become a feature of the National Qualifications Framework in 1998.

Despite the activity on the ground and strong support from providers for the use of credit within national qualifications and funding frameworks, government policy remained unchanged. Unitisation was accepted as the way to achieve greater flexibility for adults and credit was seen as too complex and unproven. The links between unitisation and credit were not recognised or accepted.

During the late 1990s lack of certainty about credit's position in policy meant that developments on the ground slowed down in England. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, however, credit became a feature of post-16 and HE policy.

Meanwhile, Open College Networks (OCNs) developed a strong presence within FE, adult and community-based learning across the UK and increasingly in work-based training too. The National Open College Network (NOCN) was established to represent and coordinate the work of all OCNs and over time NOCN has also developed its role as a standard-setting and quality assurance (QA) body. Since NOCN's incorporation and recognition by QCA in 1999 there have been 1,774,644 learner registrations with NOCN and 4,289,079 credits awarded. There were over 660,000 learner registrations to NOCN- and OCN-accredited programmes in 2000/01. Many OCN-accredited programmes now offer the opportunity for learners to accumulate credits towards NOCN qualifications.

Recent developments

More recently interest in the use of credit has increased again. Following the publication of *Success for all* ministers asked QCA and LSC to report on the future role of credit in relation to such policy priorities as widening participation, enhancing workforce development and improving the transparency of the National Qualifications Framework. In November 2002, LSC and QCA provided advice to ministers on the role of credit in relation to the learning and skills sector and the National Qualifications Framework.

As a result, in January 2003 LSC was asked to establish a national strategic working group. With QCA and LSC the working group will develop national principles for credit practice, specifications, terminology and QA systems by July 2003. In addition, it will carry out a widespread national consultation and report to ministers by March 2004.

In relation to higher education the White Paper states: 'HEFCE will work with partners in the sector – from 2003 onwards – to build upon the best current practice, and to scale this up so that there is widespread and consistent use of credit across higher education.'

In Wales the National Assembly has adopted development of a credit qualifications framework as a pivotal part of post-16 policy encompassing both further and higher education. In a speech in July 2001 the Minister for Education, Jane Davidson, announced the Wales Assembly commitment to a Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) covering further and higher education. It will be progressively implemented from April 2003.

In Scotland the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) has been in place since 2001. It encompasses both further and higher education and includes all vocational qualifications. In Northern Ireland the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (NICATS) has developed a credit qualifications framework that encompasses further and higher education and work-based training. In the UK HE consortia representing most UK universities developed a set of guidelines for the award of credit. These were consulted on and published in November 2001 (SEEC 2001).

The Cabinet Office Strategy Unit action plan for workforce development *In demand* (November 2002) reported that progress in this area will be reviewed in October 2003. In the current LSC consultation on widening participation the Council argues that there is an urgent need to develop a national credit system.

In March 2003 Ken Boston, Chief Executive of QCA, suggested in an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* that GCSEs should be unitised, with each unit carrying a credit value so that learners could combine core and specialist units according to their interests and career plans.

Current and potential applications

LSDA's case for credit has always rested on two central objectives (which are neither mutually dependent nor exclusive):

- recognise achievement and motivate learners
- make the National Qualifications Framework more transparent and flexible.

LSDA believes that both uses of credit play a crucial role in delivering key government policy objectives in relation to learning and skills as detailed below.

Raising skill levels and supporting workforce development

It is already government policy to make vocational qualifications available in a unitised form so that they can be used flexibly and built up over time. Units within National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) and other vocational qualifications vary in size because they relate to different functions and occupations. Giving a credit value or weighting to all qualifications would help learners understand their relative size and allow them to see more clearly what they had achieved and how far they had to go. It would provide employers with an easy way to quantify and cost training and to provide systems of incentives and rewards to employees.

Widening participation

There is already a considerable body of evidence in further education of the ways in which accreditation of small pieces of learning and the award of credit can help in the provision of learning for non-traditional FE students. This has been shown in the work of OCNs and other awarding bodies, and in Access to HE provision, not only in colleges but in the community, working with disadvantaged groups and in the workplace.

A clear message is that credit can play a major part in drawing new groups of learners into education, building their confidence and motivating them to continue. It also offers a way for learners to see their 'learning account' grow and build towards qualifications at a pace and in ways that take account of their personal needs and circumstances.

A nationally recognised system of credit encompassing all qualifications and achievement could play a major role in reaching the large numbers of adults yet to become involved in lifelong learning.

Developing the national qualifications framework

LSDA believes that using credit as a feature of all qualifications and units within the national framework could play a significant role in making the framework more transparent for all users: learners, providers, employers, funders and parents. In addition, using credit to 'weigh' qualifications and units overcomes the need for a 'one size fits all' approach to unitisation.

The LSDA approach also offers the basis for a common language for describing achievement and managing relationships between different qualifications and awards.

Furthermore, it may help rationalise the number of units and qualifications by making areas of duplication and overlap more explicit. A common language for describing achievement, as proposed by LSDA, would make it possible to create qualifications based on combinations of units and to identify common units instead of duplicating them.

The role of units and credits is also being considered as part of the review of NVQs launched in January 2003 by QCA.

Local customisation of units and qualifications

A national approach to credit support arrangement would enable units and qualifications to be locally developed to meet employer and other local needs. It would help institutions to become more responsive to those needs and to fill 'gaps' in the national qualifications framework.

Promoting parity and esteem for different types of learning

The application of credit and levels to all qualifications and their unit components helps convey the important message that although achievements are different they can be valued in the same way. It can help promote vocational learning and understanding so that 30 credits at Level 3 are as valid in plumbing and retailing as they are in French or history.

This would not mean that the achievement will have the same progression outcomes but it does send a signal that the achievement is equally valid and can be compared. It could play a part in the major cultural shift now required to raise the status and importance of vocational learning.

Supporting progression, credit accumulation and transfer

Credit could be used to develop progression pathways and support credit accumulation and transfer. It is already being used in this way to some extent within further and higher education and in the development of progression routes between the two sectors. It could play an important part in developing pathways from Level 3 vocational courses and foundation degrees.

A common approach to credit within further and higher education could play an important part in the expansion of higher education as envisaged in the White Paper *The future of higher education* (January 2003).

Developing overarching qualifications and programmes

Proposals for a Modern Apprenticeship diploma, baccalaureate foundation degrees and other overarching qualifications require a way to assemble and compare combinations of units and qualifications. LSDA's approach to unitisation and credit offers ways in which this could be done. It has been incorporated into NOCN awards, Access provision and developments in Wales, such as the Modern Skills Diploma for Adults (MSDA) and the Welsh baccalaureate.

Overarching qualifications can be built by specifying thresholds in terms of rules of combinations of subjects and the level and credit value or volume of achievement required. Without some kind of volume measure such qualifications are difficult to construct. Credit provides the advantages of:

- allowing recognition of small achievements as well as large
- not requiring achievements to be of a uniform size.

Thus a small but crucial piece of learning in, say, health and safety can be recognised and combined with major specialist qualifications.

Online learning, assessment and accreditation

Credit is also now seen as highly relevant to online and resource-based learning. It provides a way to recognise increments of achievement as well as full qualifications.

There is international interest in using the credit framework as a basis for definitions of online learning materials. Ufi (the public–private partnership behind Learndirect) has encouraged awarding bodies to make credit-based qualifications available for Learndirect. A credit system is also a key component of the new NHS University launched in 2002.

Credit transcripts, as developed in Wales and the North East of England, could provide the front end for electronic portfolios as proposed by LSDA in September 2000 (see www.LSDA.org.uk/programmes/credit).

Credit could also be used to support other areas of government learning and skills policy including:

- longer term reforms to the 14–19 qualifications framework being considered by the 14–19 Task Group led by Mike Tomlinson
- development of a simplified funding methodology, formula or mechanism and a funding system based on achievement and outcomes
- a new way to set targets and measure performances varying in size and level
- a lead for credit developments in the UK so that achievement can be recognised across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland and learners' achievements count and are portable across national boundaries within the UK.

Some uses of credit

Widening participation among adults

Bristol and South Gloucestershire Central and West London, North Warwickshire, Lincolnshire and Rutland, Access to HE programmes

Accreditation

ASDAN, NOCN, OCNs, Open College of North West, Access to HE programmes, Ufl specifications, higher education

Credit transcripts

Wales, NE England, Northern Ireland

Progression frameworks for adults into higher education

Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, South Yorkshire, West of England, City of York, Community University of North Wales

16–19 baccalaureate pilots

Wales

Accreditation for national programmes

TUC training, National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaus, WEA, BT, HM Prisons/Nissan, British Veterinary Nursing Association

Flexible accreditation for employers

Virgin One Account, Botanic Inns, BT, Peugeot, Relate, Birds Eye, Walls and many small and medium-sized enterprises

Progression accord between schools, colleges and HE institutions

Leicester and local HE providers

Online learning, assessment and accreditation

Ufl framework

Frameworks for learning in the community and voluntary sector

Family Learning (North Wales), ESOL for refugees and asylum seekers (Merseyside)

Colleges and other providers use credit to support

- more flexible and relevant accreditation with opportunities for interim accreditation
- motivation of non-traditional FE learners
- partnership between colleges and other providers, including higher education
- increasing and widening participation
- new opportunities for employment and work-based learning
- development of progression and pathways into national qualifications and higher education.

Credit also acts as a focus for strategic change across an organisation and as a way to:

- improve teaching and learning
- enhance strategic planning within institutions
- improve staff and curriculum development
- map curriculum and curriculum rationalisation.

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The credit framework explained

How it works

The approach to unitisation and the credit framework developed within further education over the past decade is essentially a set of tools for **describing**, **measuring**, **valuing** and **comparing** achievement. It is not a dedicated set of qualifications nor a credit accumulation and/or transfer system, though it could be the basis for one. It is Windows, rather than a particular application like Word or Excel: **one** concept with **many** potential applications.

The approach was designed to encompass all achievement both within the National Qualifications Framework and outside it.

Range of potential applications of credit frameworks

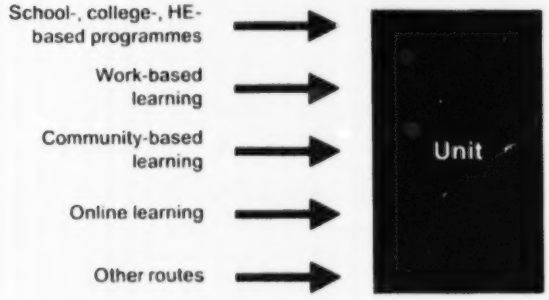
The proposals in *A basis for credit?* (FEU 1992) have been widely adopted as the basis for credit systems in use across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. They are based on:

- strict adherence to the principle of linking credit with achievement of units of assessment or whole qualifications
- a unit specification based on learning outcomes, assessment criteria, credit value and level
- assigning units to a level based on outcomes not the qualification or programme they may form part of
- insistence that assigning credit value or awarding credit is always at a specific level (Level and credit value are not to be conflated because it is then difficult to distinguish between high achievers and high accumulators.)
- a single framework encompassing all post-16 achievement from entry level to postgraduate/professional level
- basing all qualifications on combinations of units unless they comprise a single unit
- adopting a common language for describing achievement and in particular total clarity about the distinction between units of assessment on the one hand and delivery on the other (for which the term module was used)
- describing and measuring all achievement, whether vocational, general or academic, in the same way.

The unit specification

At the heart of this approach is the unit specification.

A unit is **a unit of assessment** and relates only to what is achieved. It does not specify any particular delivery or assessment method. It recognises that learners can achieve the same outcomes through a variety of learning experiences and that their achievement may be assessed and assured in a number of ways.



A unit is defined as a coherent set of learning outcomes that may be of any size. Some coherent and assessable units may be very small. Others may be as large as whole qualifications.

Unit specification

A unit is a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and includes:

- title
- learning outcomes
- assessment criteria
- credit value
- level.

The level of a unit is derived from agreed level descriptors. The credit value derives from the notional learning time required for a learner on average to achieve the outcomes of the unit. It can be represented as:

$$\text{Credit value} = \frac{\text{Notional learning time}}{\text{30 or 10}}$$

Note
NOCN/OCNs use 30 hours. Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and UK higher education use 10 hours. LSDA believes that there are advantages and disadvantages to both figures but that one figure needs to be agreed and shared across the UK.

The credit framework offers both:

- language for describing achievement and
- method of quantifying achievement.

It brings together the three critical elements in describing achievement:

- **Learning outcomes and assessment criteria**
  what has been achieved?
- **Credit value**
  how much has been achieved?
- **Level**
  how demanding/difficult/complex was the achievement?

A unit must always be assigned a credit value at a level.

The unit specification is a minimal specification. Depending on the use to which it is put, other information can be added: for example, assessment method, delivery method or grading criteria.

Following this approach, learning and achievement in institutions across a locality or indeed the National Qualifications Framework could be presented as in the diagram on page 12. Rules of combination, effective guidance, clear funding arrangement and other safeguards would ensure that learners made best use of the system.

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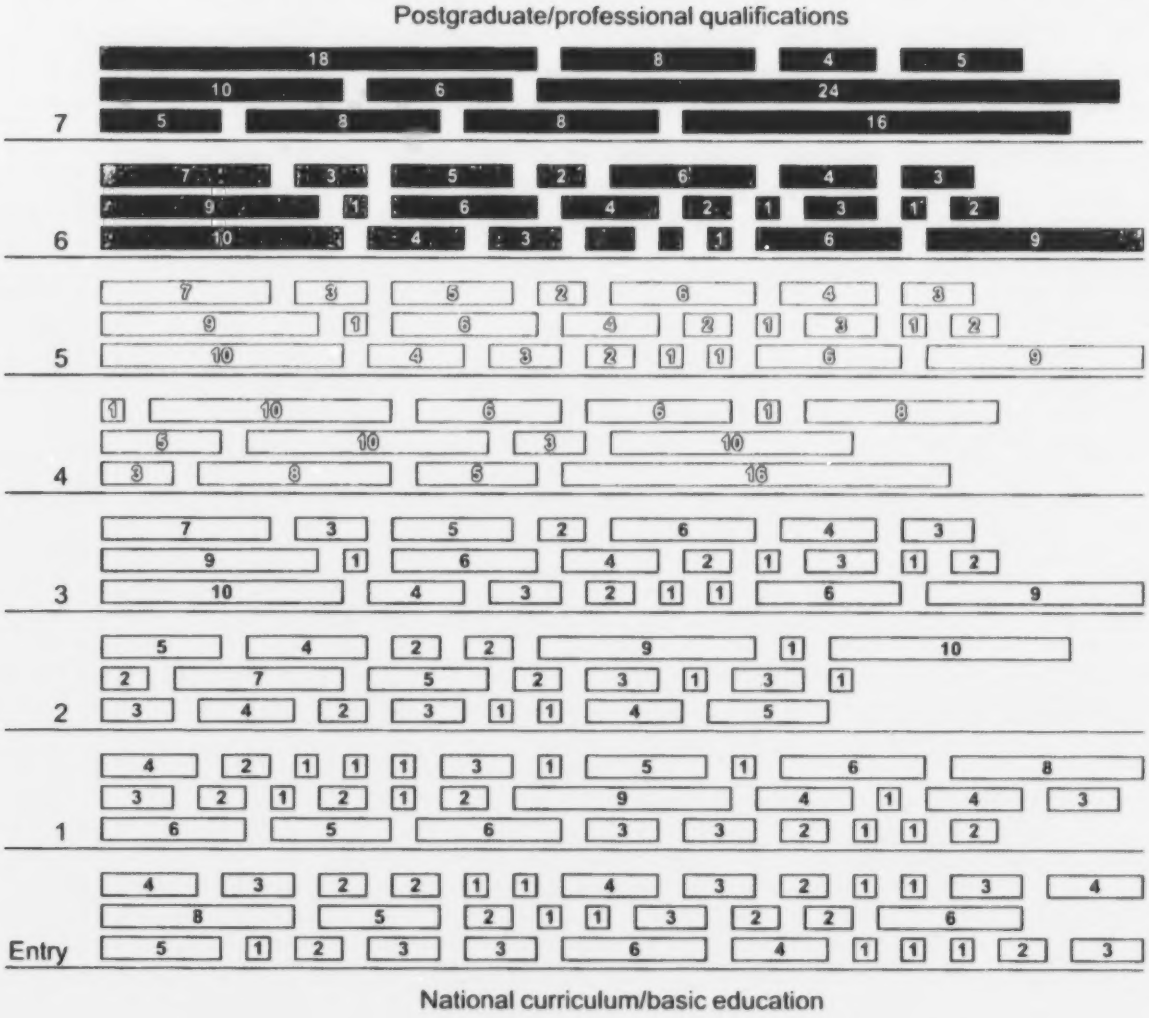
Map of credit-based units and qualifications



Note
Numbers = credit values

This approach, or variants on it, can be applied to all qualifications and units and other achievements so long as the outcomes are clear. There is a more detailed explanation on the LSDA website at www.LSDA.org.uk/programmes/credit

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Next steps

Analysis

It is notable how much developments across the UK in England, Wales Northern Ireland and higher education have in common. In particular:

- a multi-level framework with the level descriptors from entry level to higher education/professional qualifications
- credit based on achievement of units of assessment and learning outcomes
- rejection of a 'one size fits all' approach, enabling units and qualifications to be of any size
- use of notional learning time to establish the credit value of units and qualifications
- recognition that the framework enables but does not by itself establish credit accumulation, credit transfer and other credit-based systems.

The approach used across the UK, and to a slightly lesser extent in Scotland, shows a high level of convergence and adoption of the approach described earlier by LSDA. This reflects the organic development of the proposals through local, regional and national activity over a relatively long period. These ideas have been developed, tested and evolved through practice. Credit frameworks in England, such as NOCN, Access to HE programmes, UfI, and consortia arrangements in the localities and regions, have been involved in developing and testing this approach. The recent White Paper on higher education cited the success of the regional framework in Derbyshire involving HE and FE institutions that use this approach.

New impetus required

Despite these developments it is also clear that credit developments across the UK have been held back by lack of clarity about the position of credit in relation to policy on funding, qualifications and progression. While there have been notable achievements, some developments have stalled and been put on hold because of these uncertainties. This is not only true of developments in England, it has also affected progress in Wales and Northern Ireland. A number of UK awarding bodies have also indicated interest in using credit but have held back because of lack of clarity about the relation of credit to the regulation of the National Qualifications Framework.

The uneven and patchy development across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland threatens that different principles and specifications will be adopted. Since learners move between different countries and regions within the UK and often move into further and higher education across the borders there are real dangers in not addressing this on a UK-wide basis.

There are key messages emerging from these developments (see below).

- There should and could be a common approach to credit operating across the UK and encompassing post-16 and higher education including work-based learning.
- The existing high degree of convergence on the basic principles, specifications and terminology should be refined and adopted rather than seeking to develop a new approach.
- Bottom-up developments have reached their limit and must be complemented by initiatives and support from national agencies.
- Developments cannot progress much further without a clear DfES policy on credit.

LSDA believes that the establishment of a common approach to credit within and outside the national qualifications framework is long overdue. There is a danger that different approaches will develop in different parts of the UK and within further and higher education in England. Moreover, at this point there is a willingness to use a common approach and many of the tools for establishing it are in place. This is in line with the position taken in the recent HE White Paper (January 2003).

Ways forward

LSDA believes that it is now necessary to take some critical steps to realise the full benefits and potential of credit. This will be good for a range of interested parties within and beyond the learning and skills sector including providers, employers, regulators, planners, HE and awarding bodies. Some critical steps are listed below.

- The role of credit within national policy needs to be clarified and commitment made to the use of credit for specific purposes, such as development of the National Qualifications Framework, widening participation and developing skills in the workplace.
- The development of credit-based approaches needs to be as consistent as possible across the UK with a common approach within both further and higher education.
- Existing credit framework developments should be used as appropriate. (Developments should also seek to inform and draw on emerging credit systems in Europe including the European Credit Transfer System, ECTS.)
- A set of principles, specifications, terminology and QA processes needs to be established across the learning and skills sector, HE and beyond with a national consultation to secure agreement and raise awareness and understanding. (Provision of the interim advice may be needed before final confirmation and agreement.) National demonstration projects should be mounted across different localities, regions and vocational sectors.
- The Tomlinson task group on 14–19 qualifications should consider the relevance of credit, in particular its role in preparing young people for lifelong learning and in motivating them to participate and learn beyond 16; a baccalaureate or overarching qualification could use credit to quantify achievement as with the Welsh baccalaureate.
- Providers, awarding bodies, regulators and funding councils need to tackle management information system (MIS) issues and ensure that there are robust systems to support the use of credit within local, regional and national systems.
- A national programme of training and support needs to be developed to raise awareness and understanding and promote consistent practice within the learning and skills sector.
- Digital and web-based technology should be used to help learners build credit-based portfolios to act as a personal database of their achievements.

LSDA new and planned work

LSDA is currently involved in the following activities relating to credit and unitisation:

- strategic policy support for government and national agencies on unitisation and credit developments
- evaluation and mapping of credit developments across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and monitoring developments in Europe and worldwide
- development of proposals for the use of credit within international specifications for the development of online learning materials
- through DYSG (LSDA's operational arm in Wales) support for developments in Wales with particular reference to the development of common accord on credit by awarding bodies
- a credit equivalence project in collaboration with partners in Wales, Northern Ireland and regions and localities in England
- maintaining and developing LSDA credit framework website
- advice and support for awarding bodies and other organisations developing credit systems
- web-based learner portfolios incorporating credit-based approaches
- publications, including unitisation and credit framework website, within the LSDA site at www.lsda.org.uk/programmes/credit/

FAQs

Isn't credit associated with, or likely to be perceived by the public as, lowering standards in education and training? Meaningless numbers will replace full qualifications and undermine public confidence in the qualifications system.

Credit is not intended to replace qualifications but would help the public interpret and understand their value better. Assigning a credit value and level to all qualifications and unit components could be used to build public confidence and understanding of qualifications.

Won't credit lead learners into a pick-and-mix approach and leave them with bits and pieces of learning, which will be of no use to them? Learners need coherence; credit undermines this.

All modular/unitised systems have the potential for learners to make unwise choices. Credit actually reduces the danger of incoherence in learner choices because it overcomes the need for a 'one size fits all' approach to unitisation.

Credit also makes it easier to specify rules of combination. In practice learners, and in particular adult learners and their employers, tend to choose sensible (mix-and-match) combinations that are useful and relevant to their needs.

Won't people think that because they have a certain number of credits that they can progress and transfer to any course they choose?

This is very unlikely. Learners will know that usually only particular combinations of qualifications and units at a specific level will be acceptable to admissions tutors and employers. This will depend on subjects/vocational areas units. As now, some entry requirements will, focus more on specific outcomes than others, for example, entry to an engineering degree compared with law or business.

Isn't credit too complicated? It will add new layers of complexity to the qualifications framework and create difficulties for regulators, awarding bodies, funders and providers.

Applying credit value to the qualifications framework will not be particularly complex. Indeed it would not add greatly to the current process of accreditation and provision of information about guided learning hours and qualification level. It could be done gradually and incrementally.

What added benefit does credit offer in terms of flexibility over and above what is planned in terms of unitisation?

Credit would help simplify and rationalise the approach to unitisation. Without credit all units are required to be a single size or multiple of one size. It offers a way in which to preserve the integrity of subjects and qualifications such as NVQs and place them within a coherent unitised framework. Experience has shown that unitisation without credit will prove far more complex than with it.

Haven't providers, awarding bodies and others already faced too many changes in the qualifications system in recent years? While there may be a strong case for credit we should not overload the system with more change for the time being.

Credit is not as complex as is sometimes thought. Providers, awarding bodies and other stakeholders have been at the forefront in advocating a role for credit within the qualifications framework. They have argued that it would simplify and clarify the system for learners, teachers, employers, higher education and others. In addition they have argued that it would help them deliver the very things the government wants – responsiveness, flexibility, transparency, high standards, higher participation, access, and so on.

How does credit relate to grading? Many qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework offer grading. Credit does not indicate grades and cannot distinguish between different levels of achievement.

Credits and grades can easily coexist. Grades are finer measures of level needed within some qualifications, and not in others. Credit value can be assigned to qualifications and unit components irrespective of whether they are graded. In higher education degrees and modules carry credit points and are graded too.

Credit is based on the use of notional learning time. How can this be applied to competence-based qualifications such as NVQs which have been explicitly developed to overcome timeserving?

Fundamental to the approach is that credit is only awarded for the achievement of qualifications and units. Notional learning time is simply used as a way to measure the volume of qualifications/units. It plays no part in determining whether learners have achieved the qualification or unit, or whether they are awarded credit.

Educationalists are enthusiastic about credit but are other stakeholders, in particular employers, interested?

There is a great deal of evidence that employers are as interested in credit as many other stakeholders. Employers see many advantages in a currency that will allow them to compare qualifications and units, one with another.

In the early 1990s major employers such as Sainsbury's, BP and TSB gave their support to an initiative to develop a credit framework for London, which was backed by all the Training and Enterprise Councils in the region.

How can funding be based on credits when some subjects and learners cost more to provide for than others?

Credit-based funding is one possibility. The case for using credit within the national qualifications system does not depend on it. If credit is used within a funding formula/system, as planned in Wales, a whole set of other factors will need to be included to take account of costs of provision, specific needs and priorities in government policy.

For the long term, credit is neither ruled in nor out. Isn't it better to wait and see how developments turn out in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland? In a few years' time we may be in a position to judge but to make a specific decision at the present time would be a mistake.

This development is already long overdue. The 'Kennedy' report (1997) called for the establishment of a credit system to encourage widening participation within 5 years. The Learning and Skills Act has given us new structures that require new approaches and thinking. Developments in Wales and Northern Ireland, which use the same qualifications as England, will be constrained unless more positive signals are sent out about the role of credit in the NQF.

How much evidence is there that credit will bring the predicted benefits? Isn't there a danger of many unforeseen consequences that make it too risky at present?

The role of credit, as indicated above, is in line with, and supportive of, current policy trends. It can be introduced in an evolutionary way. It should be seen as a solution rather than a problem. It can make the architecture of the qualifications system more flexible and transparent while safeguarding standards and the nature and diversity of qualifications.

Further information

For up-to-date information see the LSDA website www.lsda.org.uk/programmes/credit/ or contact ttait@LSDA.org.uk

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